E-mail Subscription Management For the Public Sector:

Transforming Communication with Citizens

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Introduction: E-mail is a Critical Communication Tool for Government

Effective and efficient communication is vital to any government entity's mission. However, timely communication with citizens and stakeholders can be difficult because of budget constraints and limited manpower. Many technology initiatives developed to resolve communication issues simply have not delivered expected results. Government agencies have exhausted significant resources keeping their websites up-to-date, only to produce disappointing levels of usage. Research indicates that the majority of government website users visit once and rarely, if ever, return to that government's site. How can governments more effectively reach citizens? E-mail is the answer.

- Requiring citizens to return to the website for updates is reactive.
  E-mail allows government to deliver information <u>proactively</u> to interested citizens.

- Over 70 percent of government website users visit infrequently.
  E-mail drives citizens back to government websites repeatedly.

- Citizens are five times more likely to check e-mail on any given day than visit a government website[1].
  E-mail gets used daily and is the number one use of the Internet.

Many government agencies have made targeted e-mail communication a top priority in their ongoing commitment to keeping citizens informed. More specifically, government agencies are now leveraging the time, money and energy that they have invested in their websites by providing citizens with the option to receive e-mail alerts expressly tailored to their interests.

E-mail communication is the simple solution to the complex problem of reaching citizens with up-to-date government information. However, to be truly effective, government agencies cannot rely on obsolete technology, such as e-mail list software. Obsolete mailing lists mean missed opportunities. Citizen communications must be relevant, timely and highly targeted – something only an e-mail subscription management solution provides.

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*"**E-mail [subscription management]**, based on a citizen's personal preferences, of new documents, meetings announcements, legislation, etc., in my estimation, **is the number one technology enhancement** available to those seeking to enhance participatory democracy."*

Steven L. Clift, www.publicus.net[2]
e-government Consultant
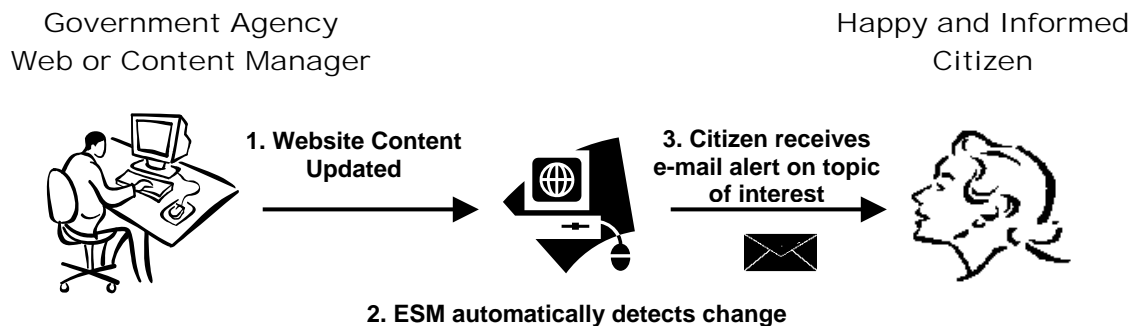

E-mail Subscription Management

What is E-Mail Subscription Management?

E-mail subscription management, ("ESM"), is an automated system that uses e-mail to notify citizens *proactively* about specific topics of interest. This web-based solution monitors an agency's site for content updates and automatically sends e-mail messages when new information is posted — driving subscribers back to the website to view it. The ESM system automatically alerts subscribers based upon their personal profile, containing the topic choices selected during registration.

To understand the value of building a subscription base using ESM, consider the newspaper industry. Publishers would go out of business if they did not have effective ways to distribute their content to interested parties — via home delivery, sales kiosks and online. That is why newspaper publishers collect subscriptions and proactively disseminate their information. The distribution channels a newspaper uses to reach its audience are just as important as the quality of its content. Similarly, an ESM system is the electronic distribution network for government content, with the website acting as the "newspaper" and e-mail messages assuming the role of the delivery mechanism. The process is simple:

1) Web visitors find information/content of interest by browsing through a website.
2) Web visitors subscribe to receive updates on topics of interest.
3) The e-mail subscription management system monitors the site for relevant content changes.
4) When the ESM system detects an update, an e-mail alert is generated and sent out to the subscribers who have expressed interest in that subject. (Alerts can also be sent to an administrator for final approval before sending.)
5) Subscribers receive an e-mail notification of an update and return to the website to view the new information.

How E-Mail Subscription Management Works

Government Agency
Web or Content Manager

Happy and Informed
Citizen

1. Website Content Updated

3. Citizen receives e-mail alert on topic of interest

2. ESM automatically detects change

- ▪ E-mail alerts can be sent with or without administrative approval
- ▪ Administrators can manually send e-mail at anytime

E-mail Subscription Management

Case Study #1: U.S. Department of Labor

Labor Department Launches E-mail Subscription Management to Expand Website Usage

Launch Date: April 2004

In 2004, the U.S. Department of Labor, DOL, deployed an e-mail subscription management system to improve communication with citizens and increase website usage. The ESM service allows the DOL to reach out to citizens proactively and directly points users to desired information. Website visitors subscribe to receive regular updates on a variety of topics, including news releases, weekly unemployment claims reports, disability employment policies, labor law compliance and small business programs.

Goals:
- Improve communication with citizens as directed by the President's e-government agenda.
- Create an enterprise-wide system where citizens can manage their profiles from one place.
- Organize and automate the dissemination of information.
- Increase the number of subscription options and subscribers.

Results:
- Initial deployment in less than 15 days.
- Approximately 291,000 e-mail messages sent in the first 90 days; 5.6 million e-mails sent (as of September 2005).
- More than 100 items available for subscribers to choose from only one month after full deployment.
- Subscriber base of more than 51,800 and growing.
- ESM deployed across eight agencies, added a ninth agency in May 2005, with plans to continue to expand.

Subscriber Growth
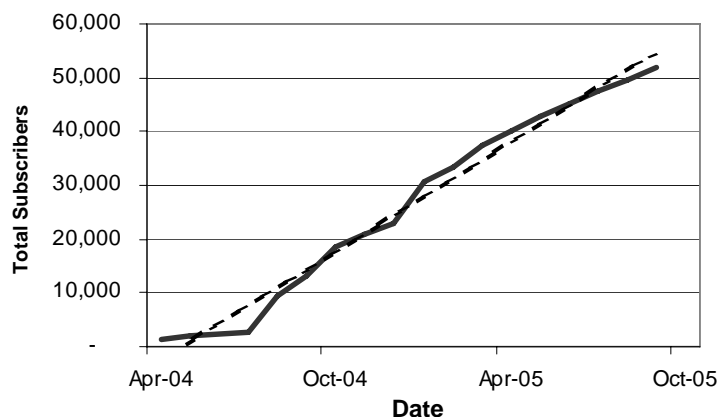
The Evolution of ESM

E-mail subscription management is the latest innovation in e-mail communication, but e-mail has been in use longer than the World Wide Web. Prior to ESM's inception, governments used list software programs to manage e-mail communications. While these programs work for the simple management of lists, they have not evolved to meet the complex and continually changing needs of organizations today.

History[3]

Early methods of sending group e-mail messages were invented almost as soon as e-mail came into popular use in academia in the early 1980's. A sender could reach an entire group of people with a click of the mouse by combining several e-mail addresses together into a single address.

The administration of the first list server was primitive and lacked automation. For example, each discussion group had a single e-mail address set up as a simple e-mail "exploder" that automatically sent each received message to all members of the list. Individuals that managed these lists manually added or removed people from the distribution list file.
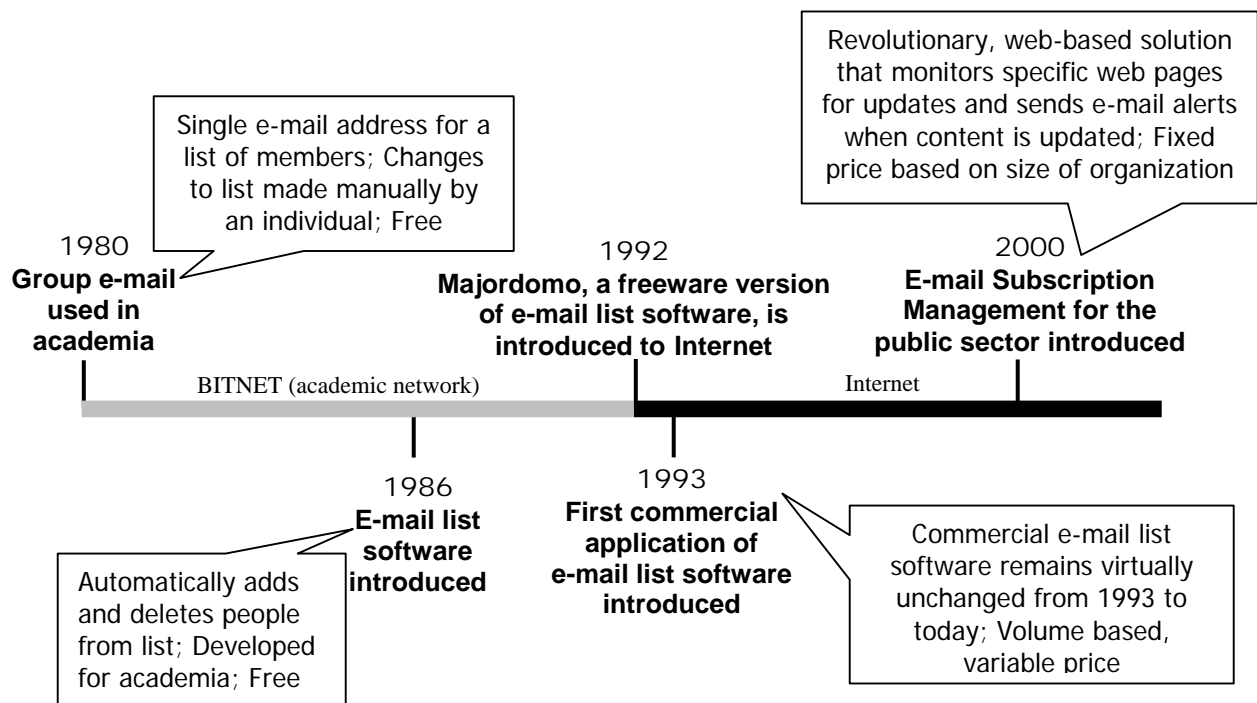
The need for automation increased as e-mail list service popularity grew and more lists were created. In 1986, the first edition of e-mail list software that automatically added and removed people from lists was created.

For nearly a decade, e-mail list software services resided primarily on the BITNET network, a network of academic sites that helped lay the groundwork for the subsequent introduction of what is now the Internet. In 1992, Majordomo, an e-mail list software application, was introduced to the Internet. Majordomo was (and still is) a freeware version of list software modeled after the list software used on BITNET.

Up until this point, e-mail list software was free. In May 1993, that changed when the first commercial application, LISTSERV®, hit the market.

E-mail list software changed very little during the 1990's. In 2000, e-mail subscription management debuted and allowed governments to take e-mail to the next level by automating distribution of e-mails when web content changes. ESM systems generate e-mail alerts automatically when content is updated, rather than forcing administrators to manually re-create content in a newsletter or e-mail format, as is currently required by e-mail list software. ESM systems continue to support traditional e-newsletters, though newsletters are just one of the many subscription options that can be made available to citizens through ESM.

E-mail Subscription Management

E-mail Subscription Management Evolution Timeline

Single e-mail address for a list of members; Changes to list made manually by an individual; Free

Revolutionary, web-based solution that monitors specific web pages for updates and sends e-mail alerts when content is updated; Fixed price based on size of organization

1980
Group e-mail used in academia

1992
Majordomo, a freeware version of e-mail list software, is introduced to Internet

2000
E-mail Subscription Management for the public sector introduced

BITNET (academic network)

Internet

1986
E-mail list software introduced

1993
First commercial application of e-mail list software introduced

Automatically adds and deletes people from list; Developed for academia; Free

Commercial e-mail list software remains virtually unchanged from 1993 to today; Volume based, variable price

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E-mail List Software vs. E-mail Subscription Management

Prior to the advent of ESM, public and private sector organizations relied on maintaining their e-mail lists using e-mail address books or list software. This technology adequately served organizations' needs to communicate with interested parties for a number of years when websites were less sophisticated. However, once websites became more complex, e-mail list software became cumbersome and ESM systems were necessary to simplify the process of information dissemination.

Extensive Programming vs. Out-of-the-Box
While the principles behind ESM systems can be imitated to a certain extent by supplementing e-mail list software with substantial custom programming, this approach is not scalable and does not leverage the experience of other governments. ESM systems are best when implemented as an out-of-the-box, hosted solution that requires no programming to launch, maintain and/or add new subscription options. As a hosted solution, ESM is highly-scalable, shares certain resources across many governments (e.g., mail-sending capacity), and offers frequent system upgrades to ensure that new technologies and SPAM concerns are considered and addressed immediately. To contrast, e-mail list software requires significant time and resources to launch and maintain. Extensive programming also is required to get e-mail list software running or to add subscription options. Additionally, software updates must be made manually to each administrator's computer or server.

Manual List Management vs. Automation
An ESM system automatically monitors websites for content changes and proactively generates e-mail alerts to subscribers when content is updated. Administrators can opt to view the e-mail alerts before sending and also can independently create and send e-mails (or newsletters) to subscribers. Comparing this automated process with e-mail list software, the latter is a manual process that requires web content managers to create and send e-mail whenever content is updated. E-mail list software also forces managers to constantly monitor the site for changes**.**

One-Size-Fits All vs. Empowering Citizens with Choice
Automating the process of e-mail alert generation allows ESM system administrators to offer more subscription options than e-mail list software. Typically, ESM systems allow public sector organizations to offer 10-to-40 times more subscription options located throughout the website, giving citizens and other interested parties far greater choices. E-mail list software is typically a one-size-fits-all solution, with limited subscription options located in only a few places throughout the site.

Cumbersome Lists vs. Easy Subscription Management
ESM systems make profile management easier for subscribers and administrators by providing a single-user profile that houses all of the subscriber's choices. By comparison, e-mail list software is much more difficult to manage because it requires subscribers to register on separate lists per subscription option rather than maintaining a single-user profile.

Fewer Subscription Options = Fewer Subscribers vs.
More Subscription Options = More Subscribers
ESM systems typically generate a ratio of 300-to-1,100 percent more subscribers than e-mail list software programs, which means that subscribers get the information they want faster than ever before. Subscribers are more willing to give out their personal e-mail address when they know they will not be bombarded with irrelevant information. These factors have helped website usage for government agencies using ESM grow by 20-to-50 percent.

Variable vs. Fixed Pricing
Flat-rate pricing is the typical cost structure for ESM systems. Fees are based on the size of the agency or entity using the system. This price structure encourages proper deployment and widespread use of the system. In contrast, the fees for e-mail list software vary widely as they are tied to the number of subscription options and e-mails sent to subscribers.

E-mail subscription management systems generate 300 – 1,100% more subscribers than e-mail list software.

E-mail Subscription Management

Summary of E-mail List Software vs. E-Mail Subscription Management

E-mail List Software		ESM

Programming and hardware required
Extensive programming required to launch system and add subscription options; Upgrades take valuable time and resources

Out-of-the-box / turnkey
No programming required to launch, maintain and/or add new subscription options; Web-based for seamless upgrades to system

Manual process
Requires extensive administrative support; Web content managers typically must make a decision to send e-mail notices manually when website content changes

Automated
Automatically monitors website for changes and proactively generates e-mail alerts to subscribers (or to an administrator for approval) when content is updated

Limited options
One-size-fits-all solution with limited subscription choices located in a few places on site

Highly-specific options
Empowers citizens to customize information with 10-to-40 times more subscription options located throughout the website

List-based
Typically requires citizens to sign up for many separate lists, and then unsubscribe from all lists as well.

Profile-based
Single-user profile makes subscription management easy for citizens and administrators

Limited subscriber base
Fewer subscription options mean fewer subscribers and return website visits

High subscription rates
Generates 300-to-1,100 percent more subscribers, which means more information is being "pulled" by citizens; Increases website usage by 20-to-50 percent

Volume-based / variable pricing
Pricing and licensing based on number of subscription options and/or number of e-mails sent

Fixed pricing
Flat-fee licensing tied to the size of the government agency or entity using the system; Unlimited system use typically offered at a fixed rate to encourage proper deployment

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E-mail is a cost effective way to reach thousands.

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CASE STUDY #2: U.S. Department of State, Office of Recruitment

**E-mail Subscription Management Solution Replaces E-mail List Software
at State Department**

Launch Date: November 2003

The U.S. Department of State launched an e-mail subscription management initiative in November 2003. Prior to the launch, the State Department used e-mail list software to broadcast messages to constituents, employees and potential recruits about new jobs, internships, training and related information. According to Diane Castiglione, the State Department's recruitment manager, the problem with e-mail list software was that everyone who subscribed received the same information, even if it was irrelevant.

"If we wanted to say that summer internship applications were not being accepted, it went out to 6,000 people, a good number of whom could not have cared less," said Castiglione.[4]

The State Department launched its new ESM system in less than one month.

Goals:
- Offer more relevant subscription options for recruitment site visitors.
- Generate a larger pool of qualified job candidates for available positions.
- Automate the e-mail alert process, limiting administrative oversight and hassle.

Results:
- The State Department grew its offerings from two e-mail subscription options with their e-mail list software to 46 options with ESM.
- In a less than two years, the State Department has increased its subscriber base from 5,600 to 95,000.
- Each subscriber averages 4.43 subscriptions.

"We wanted to make it easier for customers to get information, and make sure they ONLY got the information they needed."

Diane Castiglione
Recruitment Manager
U.S. State Department

Benefits of E-Mail Subscription Management

1. **Improved Service for Citizens**
Seventy-seven percent of Internet users – or 97 million Americans – have searched online for information from government agencies at least once.[5] That statistic, coupled with the fact that e-mail is now the number one use of the Internet, provides solid evidence that e-mail is an effective tool for reaching citizens.

2. **Significant Return on Investment (ROI)**
As with most IT expenditures, a clear and tangible way to measure a return on investment is necessary before investing in a project. ESM savings are easily calculated when increased website usage and a growing number of subscribers are factored in as the baseline measure of success. In other words, what is each website "visit" worth to government agencies in terms of better service to citizens, saved administrative time, reduced paper and printing costs, and fewer phone calls?

3. **Significant Results with Minimal Administrative Oversight**
One of the key features of an ESM system is that it automatically prepares e-mail messages whenever a change to your website is detected. The e-mails can be sent directly to subscribers, or to an administrator for review before sending, which is a process that takes less than 30 seconds.

Building a Business Case for an ESM System

A well-formulated business case supports planning and decision-making regarding purchases, vendor selection, and implementation strategies. The business case should offer a clear statement of the business problem, a potential solution, and the return-on-investment metrics for the proposed solution. Most importantly, a solid business case provides an opportunity to propose options that foster an increased sense of understanding and ownership within the project team.

When building the business case, agencies can define the tangible and intangible benefits and ROI.

Tangible Return on Investment
- Reduce or eliminate printing, mailing, and faxing costs (newsletters, bulletins, minutes/agendas, press releases, RFPs, etc.).
- Increase revenue (property sales, events, courses, etc.).
- Decrease advertising and marketing costs (RFPs, job announcements, events, etc.).
- Shift spending from less cost-effective communication efforts.

Intangible ROI
- Improve customer service and communication.

- Reduce administrative and customer service response time.

- Increase citizen awareness of new information.

- Increase website usage 20-to-50 percent after one year (increases total website usage, and therefore, the total ROI from all e-government efforts).

Partnering with a Commercial ESM Provider

When evaluating an IT project, every agency asks, "Can we do this in-house?" The appropriate follow up question is, "*Should* we do this in-house?" While it is tempting to say yes to both questions, there are several reasons to consider working with an outside partner, including resources, expertise, and budget.

Resources
How can a government agency get maximum leverage out of internal IT resources? By focusing time and energy on building solutions that are not already available in the marketplace. Deployment of an out-of-the-box ESM system can take less than five days and less than three hours of IT time. Additionally, ESM systems have been fine-tuned over many years by building on the experiences of government agencies. The end result is that ESM has evolved into a turnkey solution requiring minimal administrative oversight. Using an ESM partner improves the scalability of the project across the organization, and ensures that resources will not be needed in the future to maintain or upgrade the system.

Expertise
Setting aside the time needed to develop an ESM system internally, the next question to ask is, "Do we have the internal expertise necessary to create the system?" Even if the answer is yes, there are significant advantages to partnering with an expert in the field, who has the benefit of working knowledge of its many government customers. For example, your IT team probably could build its own word processing program, but you likely have chosen to buy one from a reputable software vendor. An ESM provider has the advantage of working with many government agencies, which helps the vendor stay abreast of the latest SPAM concerns and e-technology trends impacting mass communications via e-mail.

Budget
Using a turnkey solution from a proven outside provider is an effective way to stretch your dollars and allow your IT group to focus on its core competencies. In addition, ESM is available on a fixed-fee basis, meaning that costs will be predictable regardless of the growth in system usage.

California Department of Insurance Realizes 200% ROI Using an ESM System

Launch Date: May 2002

As state budget deficits soared in the early 2000s, the California Department of Insurance turned to e-mail to help trim costs. The Department saw the potential to reduce printing, postage, and faxing expenses by converting many of its paper-based communications to e-mail alerts. In addition, the Department realized that e-mail could significantly improve communication with insurers and citizens. Due to budget restrictions, the department could not add additional resources to manage an e-mail communication service on an ongoing basis. In the spring of 2002, the California Department of Insurance implemented *GovDelivery*® e-mail subscription management to achieve their goals. The end result? The department realized a cost savings of over $250,000 for a return on investment of more than 200 percent in the first year of deployment.

Goals:
- Improve communication with insurers and citizens in the nation's largest state.

- Reduce printing, postage, and faxing costs by distributing a wide range of information by e-mail.

- Provide an e-mail subscription service without adding additional staff or equipment.

Results:
- Identified cost savings of more than $250,000 in the first year for a return on investment of more than 200 percent.

- Deployed more than 30 different subscription options, including rate filing information, press releases, newsletters, consumer guides, and other critical information that was traditionally distributed by regular mail.

- Sent more than 1.6 million e-mails since launching.

"We have identified $250,000 in annual printing and distribution cost savings from using **E-mail Subscription Management.** *This is an ROI (Return on Investment) of over 200 percent."*

Kevin Brown
e-Government Policy Advisor
California Department of Insurance

Rules for E-mail Subscription Management Success

1. **Provide many subscription options.**
   Giving citizens many subscription choices improves the chance that there will be something of interest to them. In fact, ESM system subscribers select an average of six subscriptions.

2. **Offer subscriptions to specific information rather than (or in addition to) general e-newsletters.**
   The importance of providing specific and relevant information is greater than ever before as inboxes become increasingly cluttered and SPAM concerns continue to rise. General newsletters are often overlooked because they contain a smattering of information that may or may not be relevant to the recipient. The typical click-through rate (i.e., the rate at which recipients of e-mails visit the website after receiving an e-mail) for an e-newsletter is 8.4 percent.[6] When the recipient is allowed to subscribe to more specific information using ESM, the click-through rate can jump to well over 20 percent.

3. **Place links prominently on pages and wherever relevant content is found.**
   Put links where website visitors will encounter them – where the content is located. Subscription links should be located throughout the website. Additionally, the links should include an attention-grabbing graphic that clearly identifies it as a subscription option, such as the following example:

    Receive Open Federal Cases updates by email

4. **Make it easy for people to manage their subscription profile.**
   E-mail list software frequently requires users to manage each subscription separately and also requires several extra steps to handle each one. ESM system users can manage their subscriptions from one single-user profile. In addition, optional password protection can be offered to those users wanting added security.

5. **Keep e-mail messages short.**
   Long e-mails are blocked more frequently and rarely get read. Keep it short and provide links to content of interest.

6. **Automate the alert process for easier management.**

   Monitoring an entire website for changes can be a full-time job, especially when there are multiple administrators making changes to various areas of the site. ESM systems automatically monitor websites for specific changes and generate an e-mail alert whenever content of interest is updated. E-mail alerts can be sent automatically, or after administrator approval.

7. **Administrators should manage the content they create.**
   An organization may have as many, or as few, administrators as deemed necessary, depending on the structure of its website. For decentralized websites that have many people contributing content, typically the same people that create the content and send it out take responsibility for reviewing e-mail alerts. If more internal control is required, central administrators can be appointed to send out e-mail alerts.

8. **Promote your website everywhere!**
   Users must find the website in order to sign up for e-mail alerts. Gone are the days of "build it and they will come." While some citizens will discover your site while searching for information, you also want to reach those who may be gathering information from other sources (i.e., newsletters, phone calls, etc.), and those who visit your website less frequently. Make sure your website address is on every communication you send out, including press releases, e-mail, business letters, newsletters, bills, and more.

9. **Target media to expand awareness.**
   Beyond placing the website URL on all internal and external communications, it also is important to target the media to help promote your new ESM service. Here are some suggested media targets:
   a. Community newspapers
   b. Regional newspapers
   c. Appropriate trade publications
   d. Business media
   e. Agency newsletters

Wireless Alerts

In addition to sending out e-mail alerts, ESM systems also can send text message alerts. Short messages allow subscribers to receive updates on cell phones, pagers and other text-enabled devices.

Short messaging works alongside existing subscription functionality allowing users to choose to receive updates at both an e-mail address and on a text-enabled device. Administrators can designate which subscription items are available as short messages. This feature is especially useful for emergency communications or to deliver time-sensitive news updates to citizens or internal members of an organization.

E-mail Marketing vs. E-mail Communication

In the private sector, e-mail marketing is an important part of the marketing mix. E-mail subscription management for the public sector takes advantage of private sector experience with the importance of specificity (i.e., targeted/personalized communication) while avoiding database mining and any approach whereby the sender of the e-mail must decide what the recipient should receive. In the public sector, it is critical to put control in the hands of the citizen to avoid intrusive "marketing" practices. ESM does this by giving the citizen complete control over which topics they subscribe to receive. In the private sector, e-mail communication is frequently called "push" communication. In the public sector, it is better to let citizens make choices on what they will receive so they can, in effect, "pull" information updates of interest out of the agency website.

GovDelivery®: The E-mail Subscription Management Pioneer

GovDelivery® is the first and only e-mail subscription management system developed for the public sector. Initially deployed on a government website in early 2001, it remains the only e-mail subscription management system designed specifically for the public sector. GovDelivery also is the only e-mail subscription management approach that is completely turnkey or "out-of-the-box" meaning that it requires no hardware or software installation to setup and manage. GovDelivery is a web-based system that uses proprietary technology, Page Watch, to monitor the website to detect content changes. When an update is identified, an e-mail alert with a direct link to new information is sent to interested citizens or to an administrator for approval prior to sending. In addition, e-mail alerts can be sent manually to subscribers at anytime.

Today, over 65 government bodies in the U.S. and U.K. use GovDelivery. The system is in use by clients of all sizes ranging from local governments with fewer than 10,000 residents to the large central government agencies. Clients of note include the U.S. Departments of Labor, State and Agriculture, both Houses of the U.K. Parliament, the U.K. Highways Agency, major agencies and transit authorities in eight U.S. states, Maricopa County, AZ, and Washington D.C.

GovDelivery®

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